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Review of "What's Wrong with Sin? Sin in Individual and Social Perspective from Schleiermacher to Theologies of Liberation"

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What's Wrong with Sin: Sin in Individual and Social Perspective from Schleiermacher to Theologies of Liberation

By Derek R. Nelson

T & T Clark International, London and New York, 2009. Xii + 209pp. \$39.95. ISBN 9780567266767.

In *What's Wrong with Sin*, Derek Nelson offers a critical history of the doctrine of sin from two perspectives: the individualist and the social doctrine of sin. In the first two chapters, under the heading "Nineteenth Century Types of Social Sin," he offers two comparisons of one individual doctrine of sin and one social doctrine of sin, one from nineteenth-century Germany (Schleiermacher vs. Ritschl) and one from nineteenth-century America (the Reformed revivalist Charles Grandison Finney vs. the founder of the Mercersburg School of Reformed theology, John Williamson Nevin). The remainder of the book, under the heading "Twentieth Century Application," takes readers on a tour of various approaches to sin broadly deemed "liberationist," including Latin American, feminist, womanist, and *Minjung* theologies.

Nelson rejects the individualist notion of sin as an insufficient explanation of the various causes and effects of sin as we experience it in our own lives, our relationships, our communities, and our world. Instead, he calls for a doctrine of sin that takes seriously its social, interpersonal dimensions. However, his historical investigation of available doctrines of sin reveals what he perceives to be a deficient attention to important implications of this social doctrine of sin, two of which are particularly important for understanding his project as a whole. For Nelson, social sin can be understood in two distinct but related ways: in terms of structures or in terms of the relational self. Each way of understanding sin has its unique strengths and weaknesses.

Naming structural sin acknowledges our embeddedness in structures and systems much larger and more complex than the sum of their parts and the sins manifest in these structures (sins such as racism, sexism, or economic exploitation) cannot be overcome on a purely individual level. However, several of the theologians Nelson engages in these sections appear to grant agency to the structures themselves, so that in a very real sense the structures themselves can be said to sin. Nelson repeatedly asks how, in any meaningful sense, structures themselves can be said to "sin" without thereby granting agency to nonpersonal structures, the results of which would be highly problematic on several fronts.

Related to the criticism of structural sin taken to potentially illogical conclusions, Nelson uncovers a similar problem with doctrines of sin that emphasize the irreducibly relational character of human personhood. Drawing from feminist and process thinkers, Nelson notes the prevailing definition of the human person as a self-in-relation, influencing and influenced by a host of other entities, including persons, events, the environment, and social and institutional structures. Up to this point Nelson applauds this model for its convincing description of human personhood but, again, he detects potential problems on the horizon should this model be pressed to potentially illogical conclusions. Discussing the process theologian Marjorie Suchocki's work, Nelson asks whether a self always in the process of becoming can be said to maintain any stable sense of identity, and hence whether it can be held responsible for sin at all.

In a helpful concluding section titled "Prolegomenon to a Future Doctrine of Social Sin," Nelson summarizes the historical trajectory of the doctrine of social sin, the strengths and weaknesses of its various iterations, and its potential as a useful theological project for our time. By his reading, the future of hamartiology clearly lies in this direction and is a project well worth

pursuing. However, much of his conclusions concerning recent work on the doctrine of sin remain predominantly negative. Recent attempts to name social sin are praised for their descriptive acumen but criticized for their normative proposals, especially those that assign too much agency to structures and those that define the self in such a way as to obscure any continuing identity of the self. Rather, Nelson appears to desire a creative tension between the social and the individual notions of sin, such that the social or structural context of sin is emphasized without thereby absolving the individual of moral culpability, while relational personhood is privileged without thereby abandoning a self whose identity is somewhat fixed and therefore also morally culpable.

Unfortunately, Nelson only sketches an outline of what a constructive doctrine of sin along these lines would look like. It is to be hoped that he will pursue just such a project in the near future, for theologians, pastors and interested laypersons alike will surely benefit from his contributions in this important area of theological and practical reflection.

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